32. Social Justice

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A relatively recent keyword in the field of technical communication (TC), *social justice* extends our field's longer-term focus on critical analysis, which acknowledges the complicity of TC in normalizing and codifying oppression. But social justice has been conflated with "generally good," rather than informing notions of fairness (paradigms of justice) by amplifying the agency of oppressed people (social justice). Some of this conflation may be due to the relative newness of the term within TC. In TC scholarship, the first explicit definition of social justice appeared in 2013 and was borrowed from communication studies (Agboka, 2013). We introduced a field-specific definition two years later (Jones & Walton, 2018) and, with Kristen Moore, further fleshed out the relation of social justice to the field (Walton et al., 2019). Here, we trace that brief ***history*** and tease out nuances in how social justice can inform broader paradigms of justice which underlie our scholarship and activism. Since social justice in TC should engage social justice "in the world," we use contemporary movements to defund/abolish the police as an example of how layering social justice onto broader justice paradigms allows for both flexibility (in selecting the justice paradigms best suited to a particular goal) and precision (in pursuing fairness that accounts for oppression).

Before the keyword *social justice* became widespread in TC, related and overlapping waves of scholarship laid the groundwork for the rise of social justice as a central consideration of the field. For example, the 1990s and early 2000s saw a sociocultural turn in which scholars debunked the myth that TC is neutral (Kynell-Hunt & Savage, 2004; Scott et al., 2007). Much of this early scholarship was pedagogical in focus, calling for TC instructors to equip students to become critical actors within their employing organizations rather than unthinkingly perpetuating harm through their professional practice (e.g., Herndl, 1993).

Another wave of relevant scholarship called for diversifying our academic programs, faculty, and students. These calls for diversity asserted that contributions and expertise of underrepresented groups would improve the field. At the 2004 Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication (CPTSC) national conference, Samantha Blackmon gave a keynote address that explicitly called for increased diversity and inclusion in academic programs, but the call was largely ignored until a wave of similar scholarship less than ten years later provided traction for her arguments. For example, 2011 and 2012 saw several

individual journal articles on programmatic diversity (Savage & Mattson, 2011; Savage & Matveeva, 2011) as well as a journal special issue on race and ethnicity in TC (Williams & Pimentel, 2012).

For some time, TC scholarship featured terms such as *social action* (e.g., Savage, 1996), *civic participation* (e.g., Sapp & Crabtree, 2002), *public good* (e.g., Skelton & Andersen, 1993), and *diversity* (e.g., Savage & Matveeva, 2011), until Godwin Agboka's impactful 2013 article. Agboka's article was widely cited, laying the groundwork for conference themes, journal special issues, and award-winning scholarship heralding a "social justice turn" in the field (Haas & Eble, 2018). In 2018, we defined social justice **research** in TC as research that "investigates how communication, broadly defined, can amplify the agency of oppressed people—those who are materially, socially, politically, and/or economically under-resourced" (Jones & Walton, 2018, p. 46). We also noted that **collaboration**, respect, and action are fundamental to social justice work. Therefore, social justice centers the needs of oppressed people by engaging in participatory, strategic action.

Although they are sometimes conflated, justice (a range of paradigms) and social justice (a specific term defined above) differ in important, nuanced ways. A key difference between social justice and broader paradigms of justice is that while social justice actively engages with issues of oppression (recognizing that what constitutes "just" action is inherently affected by social, political, economic, and material affordances and constraints), paradigms of justice are predicated upon "fairness," without necessarily accounting for the effects of oppression on what makes something "fair."[1] Thus, we advocate layering social justice upon paradigms of justice. This layering ensures that marginalized perspectives are centered in the pursuit of fairness.

To engage in socially just action, scholars and practitioners of TC must be explicit and intentional about the paradigm of justice guiding their work. Different paradigms of justice inform and underlie structured societal systems, and each justice paradigm is embedded with specific values that motivate and constrain action. Thus, justice is simultaneously theoretical, applied, and practiced. We review four of the justice paradigms below, illustrating each with examples from efforts in the US to defund and abolish the police.

It is important to note that there are nuances between calls to defund and calls to abolish the police. As Angela Davis (2020) has noted, under the umbrella of the movement to abolish the police, defunding police departments is a step toward abolition. Defunding strategically removes financial support from law enforcement, with full abolition of police departments and the prison-industrial complex being the ultimate goal. However, some activists do ascribe to the belief that defunding, not total abolition, should be the final objective (with funding being reallocated to achieve equity with other publicly funded systems

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1.   As Iris Young (1990) notes, oppression can appear in five primary forms: exploitation, marginalization, violence, cultural imperialism, and powerlessness.

like education and healthcare). For the purposes of our discussion here, we acknowledge defunding law enforcement as an abolitionist goal.

Distributive justice focuses on the fair allocation of rewards and burdens. Many arguments to defund the police are informed by the distributive justice paradigm: for example, the argument that police budgets are unfairly large and that other public services, such as education, affordable housing, healthcare, and childcare, are underfunded. This argument is also informed by considerations of social justice. After all, those most negatively affected by overfunded police forces and underfunded public services are the marginalized. This example also demonstrates the relevance of distributive justice to TC because public policy, budgets, resource allocation, and civic participation are technical topics, and arguments regarding the just allocation of public funding are often presented in technical *genres,* such as policy briefs.

Procedural justice requires that the process by which outcomes are determined is fair. A typical context for the procedural justice paradigm is institutional policies and procedures—a context deeply relevant to the field because policies and procedures are documented in TC. One important consideration of procedural justice is transparency: For a process to be fair, it must be known to all relevant stakeholders. Making processes transparent can increase fairness by broadening the range of stakeholders whose interests inform those processes and the policies governing them. For example, when public interests inform procedural documents, such as police use-of-force policies, those policies can be re-envisioned to reflect an *ethic* of care focused on protecting vulnerable members of society (Knievel, 2008). This re-envisioning layers social justice (centering marginalized perspectives) onto a procedural justice paradigm (enacting fair processes).

In the context of defunding the police, procedural justice is particularly relevant to budgetary reform. Sources of police funding are myriad and confusing. The opacity regarding how police budgets are planned, approved, funded, and even measured makes it difficult for activists and policymakers to pose reforms (Auxier, 2020) and trace how assets are acquired (Alexander, 2010). This fiscal complexity creates procedural opacity, raising questions about how such procedures can be just when they cannot be widely shared, predicted, or even understood.

Retributive justice paradigms focus on "fair" punishment for crimes and wrongdoing, placing offenders and offense at the center of justice concerns (Walton et al., 2019, p. 42). However, because retributive justice paradigms rely on ideals like "fair" and "equal," these paradigms often fall short—impacting certain groups more negatively than others. The groups that consistently receive harsher punishments are predominantly marginalized populations—often stereotyped as offenders and criminals—who are already at the mercy of biased economic, educational, political, and social systems (Alexander, 2010). TC scholarship can reveal these problems with retributive paradigms: e.g., that "fair punishment" can include death and dehumanization for alleged offenders, especially those who are members of marginalized groups (Moore et al., 2017, p. 43). Offenses such as the murder of Eric Garner are enabled by a paradigm of justice that focuses on punishment, creating

conditions in which agents of the justice system may feel empowered to mete out violent extrajudicial "punishment" by acting as a conglomerated version of judge, jury, and enforcer.[2] It is partially in response to police violence (notably, the murders of George Floyd[3] and Breonna Taylor[4]) that the Abolish the Police movement has reignited. And, given the persistence of police violence in the US, supporters of the movement argue that the current retributive justice system is violent and oppressive by design. Thus, it cannot be reformed and must instead be dismantled.

Restorative justice paradigms ask that offenders, victims, and the impacted community are made "whole" based on ideals of social harmony and peace. Community and collective benefit are at the center of restorative justice paradigms (Walton et al., 2019, p. 44). Because restorative justice requires respectful collaboration that can include redress of wrongs through economic, material, and social means, this particular justice paradigm can closely align with and may be most informed by a social justice orientation. As Angela Davis (2003) argues, reconciliation and restoration can replace retribution (p. 49). However, to move toward restoration and reparation, societal institutions like law enforcement, the legal system, the prison-industrial complex, the healthcare system, and education systems must be wholly reimagined to account for community need, support, and repair. Davis (2003) notes that "the most difficult and urgent challenge today is that of creatively exploring new terrains of justice" (p. 8). For instance, layering social justice upon restorative justice paradigms requires that reparation be initiated at systemic and institutional levels. Social justice "cannot be limited to individual actions or perspectives because the oppressions it targets are structural" (Walton et al., 2019, p. 50).

Embracing Davis' imperative (recently rearticulated in Davis [2020]), we ask, how can technical communicators refrain from requiring oppressed individuals to adapt themselves to society and instead rethink the functioning of society itself as a way of restoring and repairing oppressed communities? This question is timely for the field of TC, as illustrated by an incident from the very week we drafted this keyword entry: A well-respected senior scholar posted a memo by the Department of Homeland Security to the email list for a national TC professional organization, the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW). The memo announced a new policy that threatened international students studying

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2.   Eric Garner was murdered at the hands of officers in the New York City Police Department (NYPD) on July 17, 2014. Garner was placed in an illegal chokehold, and the encounter, during which Garner stated that he could not breathe over 11 times, was recorded and highly publicized. Garner's murderers were not indicted.

3.   George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police officers in May 2020. A police officer kneeled on Floyd's neck for over nine minutes. Like Eric Garner before him, Floyd pleaded with officers, repeatedly saying, "I can't breathe" for a total of 27 times.

4.   Breonna Taylor was murdered by Louisville police officers in March 2020. Officers performed a "no-knock" warrant at the incorrect address (the correct house was over 10 miles away), shooting Taylor eight times in her own home.

at U.S. universities with immediate deportation should their classes be moved online in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. The memo was shared as an example of unethical TC that ATTW members could analyze with students to identify problems with both the policy itself and the memo, highlighting the literal life-and-death stakes of some TC and revealing the complicity of TC in oppression. In revealing oppression directly related to the field, the post demonstrated that social justice is deeply relevant to TC.

But this recognition of relevance is not universal. On the same email thread, a different senior scholar responded with xenophobic comments rejecting the responsibility of educators for their students' wellbeing or educational outcomes. Members of the field immediately spoke out against this oppressive ***rhetoric*** and began to work coalitionally to replace oppressive practices, language, and behaviors. Responses included rejecting the xenophobic comments publicly and in writing by replying all to the listserv, demanding the retraction of an oppressive publication in a TC journal, developing anti-racist resources for editors and reviewers of academic manuscripts, and other efforts.

These efforts offer a complex snapshot of what it can look like for our field to embrace Davis' imperative above. For technical communication scholars this would mean refraining from requiring oppressed individuals to adapt themselves to society. Instead, we should rethink the functioning of society itself to restore and repair community. Specifically in the example used in this chapter, reimaging how our field can be more socially just would look like not expecting international students to accept unjust precarity created by an oppressive policy and rejecting the notion that marginalized TC scholars must simply tolerate racist and otherwise unjust publication practices. We, as a field, would instead publicly call out and refuse to engage in or entertain xenophobic comments and move to rethink academic publication practices to intentionally cultivate more just and inclusive norms. This example also illustrates some broader implications for the field now that the keyword social justice has entered our disciplinary lexicon. Firstly, recognizing injustice and TC's complicity in it is a starting place for action, not an end goal. Secondly, the actions necessary to "amplify the agency of oppressed people" (Jones & Walton, 2018, p. 46) are contextual, complex, and varied, and therefore require the work of coalitions. And thirdly, layering social justice onto explicitly identified paradigms of justice offers a simultaneously theoretical and applied strategy for centering the marginalized.

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